DOLMENS IN DENMARK

Architecture and Function

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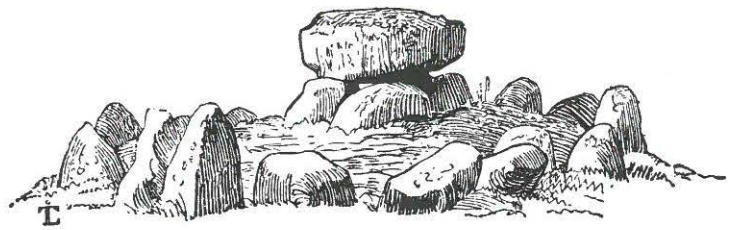

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18. Dolmens without mounds in Britain, France and Ireland

Chris Scarre

In 1865 a dramatic engraving of the megalithic monument of Pentre Ifan in south-west Wales appeared in the periodical *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (fig. 18.1).[1] It showed a couple on horseback resting under the massive capstone, profiled against the distant backdrop of hazy mountains. The artist had carefully emphasised the delicately propped nature of the stone, resting on the pointed tops of three tapering orthostats that barely seemed capable of supporting its weight.

Seven years later, a similar image was reproduced in *Rude Stone Monuments in All Countries*, written by the architect James Fergusson.[2] Fergusson's book provided one of the first general surveys of megalithic monuments, covering not only western and northern Europe, but also Asia and the Americas. One of his key objectives was to explain why early societies had chosen to build monuments of megalithic construction, using massive blocks of stone. In that context, his comments on Pentre Ifan were especially salient, and bear directly upon the question of chambers and mounds. For, he observed, "men do not raise such masses and poise them on their points for the sake of hiding them again ... The mode of architectural expression which these Stone men best understood was the power of mass. At Stonehenge, at Avebury, and everywhere, as here, they sought to give dignity and expression by using the largest blocks they could transport or raise – and they were right; for in spite of their rudeness, they impress us now; but had they buried them in mounds, they neither would have impressed us nor their contemporaries."[3]

These engravings of Pentre Ifan are typical of the large numbers of paintings and drawings of the late 18th and 19th centuries that portrayed Neolithic chambered tombs as megalithic skeletons, devoid of any covering of earth or stones. They include paintings by Romantic artists such as Johan Christian Dahl (*Hünengrab nahe Vordingborg im Winter* 1825) and the famous Caspar David Friedrich (for example *Hünengrab im Schnee* 1807 (see figs. 1.2-1.3) or *Spaziergang in der Abenddämmerung* c. 1835). The same Romantic tradition is represented in Britain by paintings of Stonehenge by William Turner (1825) and John Constable (1835). In all cases it is the power of the stones that takes centre-stage, set against a dramatic natural background of stormy sky or brooding twilight. This focus on the stones, however, masks an important issue. How many of these structures were ever intended to be visible in that

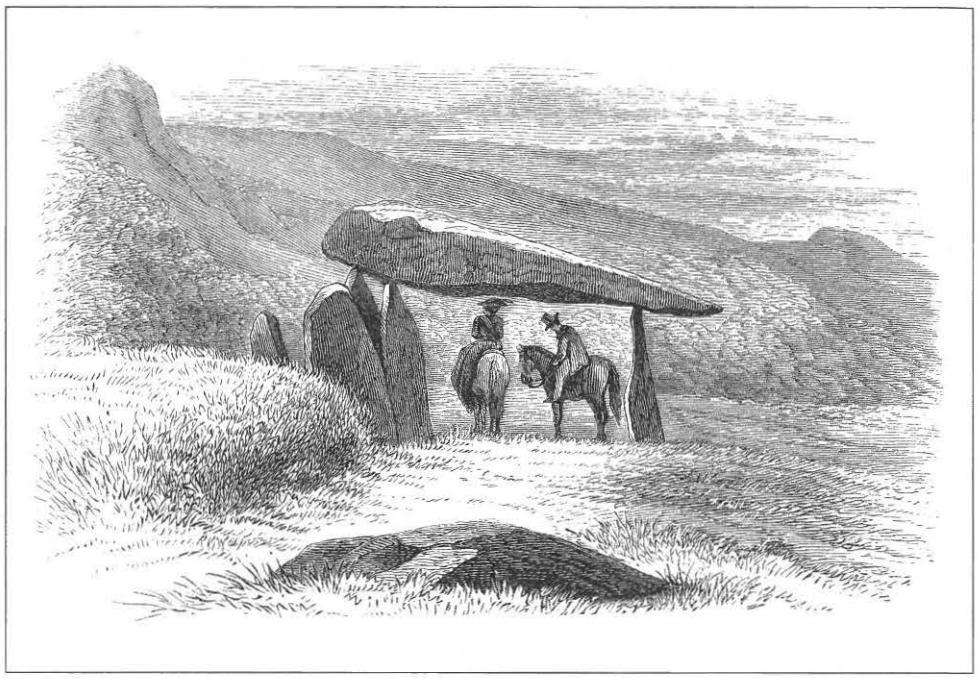

Fig. 18.1. *The portal dolmen of Pentre Ifan in southwest Wales. Engraving from 1865. The photo on page 216 is of the same dolmen.*

way? Stone circles such as Stonehenge were free-standing monuments, but were not the many chambered tombs – including Dahl and Friedrich's *hünegräber* – originally covered by mounds or cairns?

In Britain, it was the publication of the first English edition of Worsaae's *Primeval Antiquities of Denmark* in 1849 that appears to have sparked the debate. William Collings Lukis questioned Worsaae's contention that the Danish tombs consist of a "stone chamber ... perched upon the top of the mound", with the stones exposed. He noted by contrast that the British "cromlech" is "enclosed in a mound, and is either planted upon the level of the surrounding earth, or raised a little above it."[4] Lukis attributed the absence of a surviving mound (where that is the case) to processes of natural erosion: "the superincumbent earth will be carried by rain through the interstices of the cap stones and their supports, and in process of time fill up the chamber of the tumulus. The action of the elements will also tend, in course of ages, to carry the earth down the sides of the mound. This will account partly for two facts which are apparent to us now, viz. – the denudation and exposure of many cromlechs, and their being, in some cases, more or less filled with earth or silt."[5] Lukis concludes "that all cromlechs, of whatever form, were originally enclosed in mounds of earth or stone."[6]

The debate took a similar course in France. In one of the earliest descriptions of the prehistoric monuments of the Morbihan department of southern Brittany, the Abbé Mahé drew a distinction between "dolmens" (megalithic chambers) on the one hand, and "barrows" and "galgals" (earthen mounds and stone cairns) on the other.[7] That distinction was followed by subsequent writers, such as the Chevalier de Fréminville who distinguished the cairn-covered 'tombelle' of Mont Héleu (Er Grah) at Locmari-

aquer from the exposed "dolmen" of La Table de César (Table des Marchand).[8] It lived on in the Baron de Bonstetten's *Essai sur les dolmens* of 1865, one of the first general surveys of monuments of this kind. He divided "dolmens" into two principal categories: "dolmens apparents" (visible dolmens) and "dolmens couverts d'un tumulus en terre ou en cailloux' (dolmens covered by a mound of earth or stones). Bonstetten was at pains to defend his conclusion that "dolmens apparents" are not megalithic structures that have lost their mounds, and that no process can reasonably be envisaged that would have led to the removal of those mounds if originally they had existed.[9]

Yet not all French or francophone writers saw matters in these terms. In the 1850s Alfred Fouquet had argued that the exposed or free-standing "dolmens" of the Morbihan were in fact merely the denuded remnants of formerly covered monuments. Take the Gavrinis passage tomb and remove its covering cairn, he suggested, and one would be left with a "dolmen" like the Table des Marchands: "more complete and more decorated; but, within several centuries, the weather and human action will assuredly turn it into a simple dolmen."[10] By the 1870s, this had become the prevailing view. In *La France préhistorique d'après les sépultures et les monuments* (1889) Émile Cartailhac affirmed at the very outset that these monuments were originally "furnished with a covering of pebbles, stones or earth and buried beneath a mound of greater or lesser height." He contrasted this original design with the condition to which many megalithic chambered tombs had ultimately been reduced: "Over time the monument has become degraded and the covering has disappeared. The blocks have been exposed and the chamber, which has been emptied, is itself often ruinous."[11] He repeated this view a few years later in *Les* âges *préhistoriques de l'Espagne et du Portugal.* The Romantic image of the free-standing monument was deceptive: the megalithic structure deprived of its covering was a monument in ruins.[12]

Scandinavian prehistorians were unconvinced. Cartailhac drew criticism from no less an authority than Oscar Montelius, who like Bonstetten preferred to distinguish a category of free-standing dolmens (*freistehende Dolmen*) from buried or below-ground chambers with entrance passage or entered via a vertical shaft.[13] In Britain, by contrast, the arguments advanced by Lukis and others had, by the early years of the 20th century, won general acceptance. Thus in the last (seventh) edition of *Prehistoric Times* (1913), John Lubbock observed: "We may regard a perfect megalithic interment as having consisted of a stone chamber, communicating with the outside by a passage, covered with a mound of earth, surrounded and supported at the circumference by a circle of stones, and in some cases surmounted by a stone pillar or 'menhir'."[14] Allowance was made for occasional exceptions,[15] but the concept of the "normal" megalithic tomb encased within its mound was firmly established. It remained so through the middle decades of the century. Gordon Childe, in the last edition of the *Dawn of European Civilization,* puts the matter straightforwardly: "Built chamber tombs, when not erected in an artificial excavation, were probably always put underground artificially by burial in a mound or cairn."[16]

Within recent decades, however, such a standardised view of the "classic" chambered tomb has come increasingly to be questioned. The basis for this re-evaluation

is twofold: first, a growing wariness of "normative" concepts within archaeology, accompanied by a new and greater emphasis on the uniqueness and diversity of individual monuments; and secondly, new excavations leading to a heightened awareness that Neolithic monuments are often multi-phase structures that reached their final form only through successive stages of addition and modification. Thus it is a combination of theory and field observation that has reopened the question of chambered tombs and their mounds.

Megaliths without mounds in western Britain

Let us begin by returning to Pentre Ifan, the megalithic chamber at the heart of the 19th century debates (see photo on page 216). Its visual impressiveness, with massive but delicately poised capstone, has been taken up again by recent writers seeking to connect the monument with its landscape.[17] In particular, the orientation and inclination of the capstone has been compared to the profile of Carn Ingli, a rocky mountain outlined on the skyline 3.5 km to the west. The argument is that the builders of megalithic monuments intentionally referenced natural landforms in their layout and design, creating conscious links between chambered tombs and important and powerful places in the landscapes. Thus the capstone of Pentre Ifan, like the summit of Carn Ingli, is oriented north-south and dips downwards towards the north. This resemblance leads to the conclusion that "important architectural features of the monument appear to duplicate the incline of the mountain outcrop."[18]

The visual link proposed between Pentre Ifan and Carn Ingli is largely dependent on the visibility of the capstone, and the absence of a covering mound. James Fergusson had remarked the complete absence of side-walls, and the remoteness of the location that made it unlikely that local farmers had removed the cairn to take material for buildings or field walls.[19] This was dismissed by one contemporary as "unqualified nonsense"[20] but it was not until the 1930s that unequivocal evidence for an enclosing cairn or platform was discovered. Excavations in 1936-37 revealed the outline of an elongated structure extending back over 30 metres from the chamber (fig. 18.2). The edges of this cairn had been marked out by smaller upright stones, represented mainly by their empty sockets, though these extended for only 17 metres along the eastern and western sides of the cairn and did not appear to enclose the whole of the structure.[21]

These discoveries established the original presence of a structure surrounding the Pentre Ifan chamber but fell short of determining its height and profile. In the 1970s the idea was revived that portal dolmens (such as Pentre Ifan) had been essentially free-standing.[22] The multi-phase nature of Neolithic monuments was gaining wider recognition, and it was also suggested that Pentre Ifan had initially been set within a low cairn, and that the tall orthostatic façade was a later addition, along with the lengthening of the cairn.[23] An alternative view considers the megalithic chamber and façade to be the primary elements, with the whole of the cairn a later addition, and argues that the latter was of relatively low height.[24] The idea that the cairn may

have been merely a platform around the base of the chamber is seductive but hard to substantiate. Other reconstructions adhere to the concept of a more substantial structure, enclosing the chamber although not necessarily concealing the capstone.[25]

Despite the continuing uncertainty, recent interpretations have largely accepted the proposal that Pentre Ifan and similar sites were not masked by mounds. The massive capstones raised on conspicuously slender pillars have conjured the evocative image of "stones that float to the sky" and have led to the suggestion that the purpose of these structures was not to create a closed funerary chamber but to venerate and display the capstones themselves.[26] These capstones, at Pentre Ifan and at the neighbouring site of Carreg Samson, may have been earth-fast boulders dug from the very spot on which the chambers were later constructed.[27] Hence the massive capstones that are typical of portal dolmens may have been symbolically powerful in themselves, and the surviving structures might be more than merely the megalithic skeletons exposed by the removal or erosion of cairns. In this class of tomb, such cairns may never have existed.

It must be emphasised, however, that in this respect portal dolmens may have been exceptional among the Neolithic chambered tombs of western Britain. Most megalithic burial chambers of this region were covered by mounds or cairns, and some remain so to this day. The Cotswold-Severn long mounds of southwestern England and south Wales, for example, enclosed megalithic chambers. Excavations at Belas Knap in 1929-30 revealed that the stone-built cairn had had a covering of overlapping slabs laid like roof tiles, and a ridged configuration can be envisaged.[28] A central ridge was also observed at West Tump, Cow Common Long and Lamborough Banks and most if not all may have been finished with a roof-like structure with central ridge and sloping sides.[29] What should be remarked in all these cases, however, is that construction of the chambers preceded the building of the cairn, and the chambers must therefore, for a short period at least, have been free-standing. This is confirmed by the sequence of constructional phases at Hazleton North and Ascott-under-Wychwood.[30] There is nothing to preclude the possibility that the chambers at these sites were used for burial from the very outset. Thus interment in a free-standing megalithic chamber could have been much more common than we now believe, even though in most cases those chambers were subsequently covered by a mound or cairn.

The well-known passage grave of Bryn Celli Ddu on Anglesey has a particular place in this debate by virtue of the diversity of interpretations that have been placed on its constructional sequence. Excavations in 1925-29 revealed that the passage and chamber, together with its oval mound and orthostatic kerb, concealed a series of earlier structures.[31] The most significant of these was an annular ditch with an arc or circle of stones on its inner edge. At its centre, immediately behind the chamber, was a pit and lying flat beside that (though originally upright) a single decorated block known as the "pattern stone". The multi-phase character of the sequence at this site was demonstrated not only by the fact that the pattern stone and stone circle had been entirely hidden by the mound. It was also clear that the orthostatic kerb had

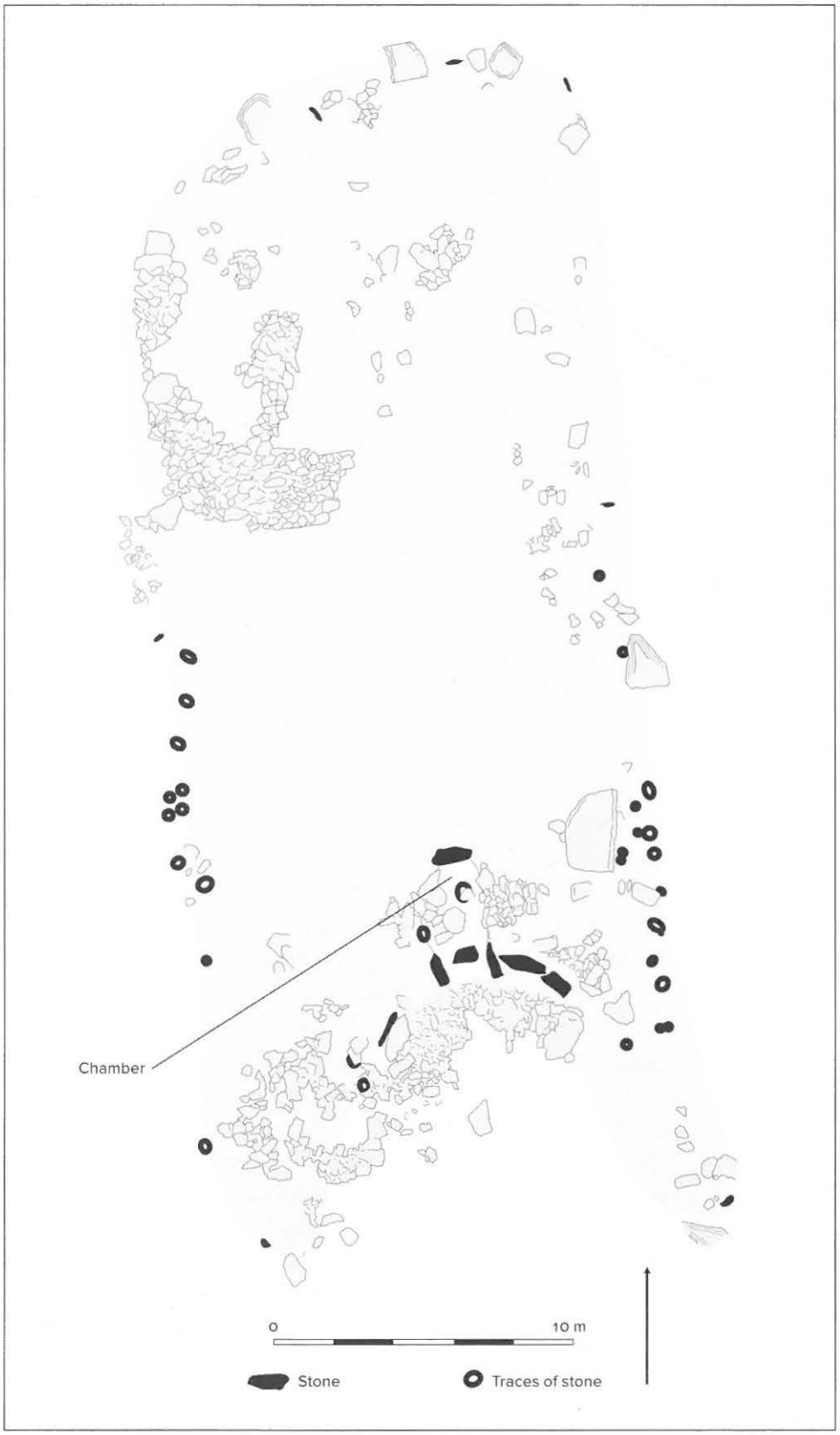

Fig. 18.2. *Pentre Ifan: Plan of the monument showing the cairn footings revealed in 1936-37.*

been built directly on the infill of the annular ditch. O'Kelly argued that a henge represented by the ditch and stone circle preceded the passage tomb.[32] Against this is the absence of a bank outside the ditch, and the likelihood that the digging of the ditch had furnished the material for the mound. Hence various alternative reconstructions propose a small initial mound enclosing the burial chamber, followed by enlargement to give an oval mound with orthostatic kerb overlapping the top of the earlier ditch.[33]

Documentary evidence confirms that the cairn, at least in its final form, enclosed the passage and chamber. This is shown by a schematic 1723 engraving that appears to show the mound intact, although from a later illustration it can be seen that by 1847 the mound was already badly degraded (fig. 18.3).[34] Some of the original mound material still survived on top of the capstone when excavations began in 1925,[35] though it was removed and later replaced by the modern replica mound that covers the chamber today. Recent proposals for a two-phase mound leave open the possibility, however, that the original smaller mound may only have lapped around the base of passage and chamber. Even the initial mound probably buried the "pattern stone", however, suggesting an initial mound-free stage. That may have been only of short duration. Cremated human remains were found in association with several of the stones in the stone circle and radiocarbon dates supported by Bayesian analysis indicate that these deposits predate by a short interval the deposits from the passage and chamber.[36] The overall impression is of a relatively rapid transformation from virgin site to stone structures (with human remains) and to mounded tomb. Passage and chamber may have appeared at a fairly early stage in this sequence. They may at first have remained visible, only partially enclosed by the small initial mound, even if some measure of support was essential from the outset to stabilise the shallowly bedded orthostats. Alternatively, the initial mound may from the outset have covered the chamber, with the expanded mound filling the remainder of the space within the orthostatic kerb later to form a lower platform.[37]

Bryn Celli Ddu provides an excellent example of the complexity underlying "finished" monuments. It also illustrates the difficulty of deciphering constructional sequences even where evidence from excavation is available. Above all, however, it draws attention to the changing appearance of the monument through time, and demonstrates that the addition or enlargement of the covering mound was often one of the final acts in a lengthy drama. In some cases, indeed, it may have been a mark of closure. We shall return to that concept below.

Free-standing megaliths in Ireland

Portal dolmens and passage graves are not restricted to western Britain but are also two of the principal types of megalithic tomb in Ireland (where they are known as "portal tombs" and "passage tombs" respectively). In Ireland, as in Britain, it has been argued that the builders of portal tombs intended the capstones to be visible. Of the 180 or so portal tombs in Ireland, 86 have traces of a cairn, and the greater scar-

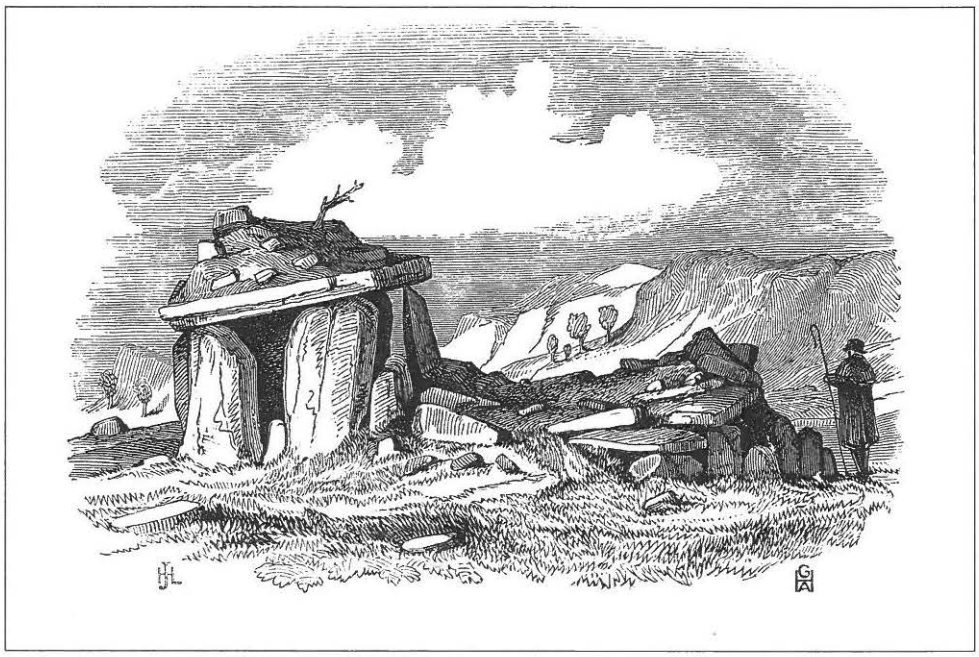

Fig. 18.3. *The passage grave Bryn Celle Ddu stands on the island of Anglesey in North Wales. On this 19th century drawing, remains of the mound fill can be seen on top of the capstone.*

city of cairn remains in areas of fertile soil suggests that where they are missing their absence is due to human clearance.[38] In less intensively exploited regions such as the Burren, the outlines of kerbless cairns have been revealed by excavation and are visible today (fig. 18.4). In no case does the surviving remains of the cairn approach the height of the chamber, and they were most likely low bench-like structures, above which the capstone would always have been visible.[39] It is possible that the placing of the capstone required the construction of a full-height mound or ramp up which the massive slabs could be dragged; in which case the low bench-like cairn could be either the reduced remains of that structure, or an entirely separate construction.

Portal tombs seem generally to have been enclosed within a low cairn or platform. For wedge tombs, a late Neolithic monument type, the evidence suggests a less uniform arrangement. Wedge tombs consist of a slab-built chamber covered by one or more capstones, with an entrance at one end, and excavations at some sites have revealed the foundations of a substantial stone-built cairn edged by carefully laid blocks. At examples such as Baurnadomeeny in Co. Tipperary and Island in Co. Cork it is likely that an outer cairn covered and entirely enclosed the chamber save for the entrance.[40] At Island, however, it has been suggested that the outer cairn might be a Middle Bronze Age addition.[41] Furthermore, the majority of wedge tombs in southwest Ireland lack any trace of a covering mound, and while this absence is often explained in terms of natural erosion or deliberate "robbing", there is genuine doubt as to whether many of these sites were ever covered.[42] In some cases, the apparent cairns consist of modern field stones; in another case excavation showed the cairn to be unrelated to the chamber; while at Leenane the cairn may have been placed to provide structural support for the chamber orthostats.[43] Thus some wedge tombs

may have been covered by cairns, but others – perhaps the majority – appear to have been free-standing with a low bench-like surround at most.

In contrast to portal tombs and wedge tombs, the two other principal types of Irish megalithic tomb – court tombs and passage tombs – are generally believed to have been originally covered by a mound or cairn. In some cases nothing survives. It has been observed, for example, that as many court tombs (some 50%) as portal tombs lack any trace of a cairn.[44] Excavated court tombs such as Ballyglass and Creevykeel make clear, however, that they had substantial kerb-defined cairns, and the relatively small chambers with their modestly proportioned capstones were probably originally covered. Thus while a denuded court tomb and a denuded portal tomb may bear some superficial resemblance to each other, they relate to structures that were initially very different in conception and design.

Irish passage tombs, too, appear generally to have been covered by a mound or cairn. This must be qualified, however, in two important respects.

First, there are exceptions, in particular the unusual passage tombs of the Carrowmore cemetery close to Sligo Bay in western Ireland. Most of this cluster of 25 surviving monuments (out of an original total of around 60) consist of a relatively simple megalithic chamber roofed by a single capstone, set within a boulder circle.[45] A

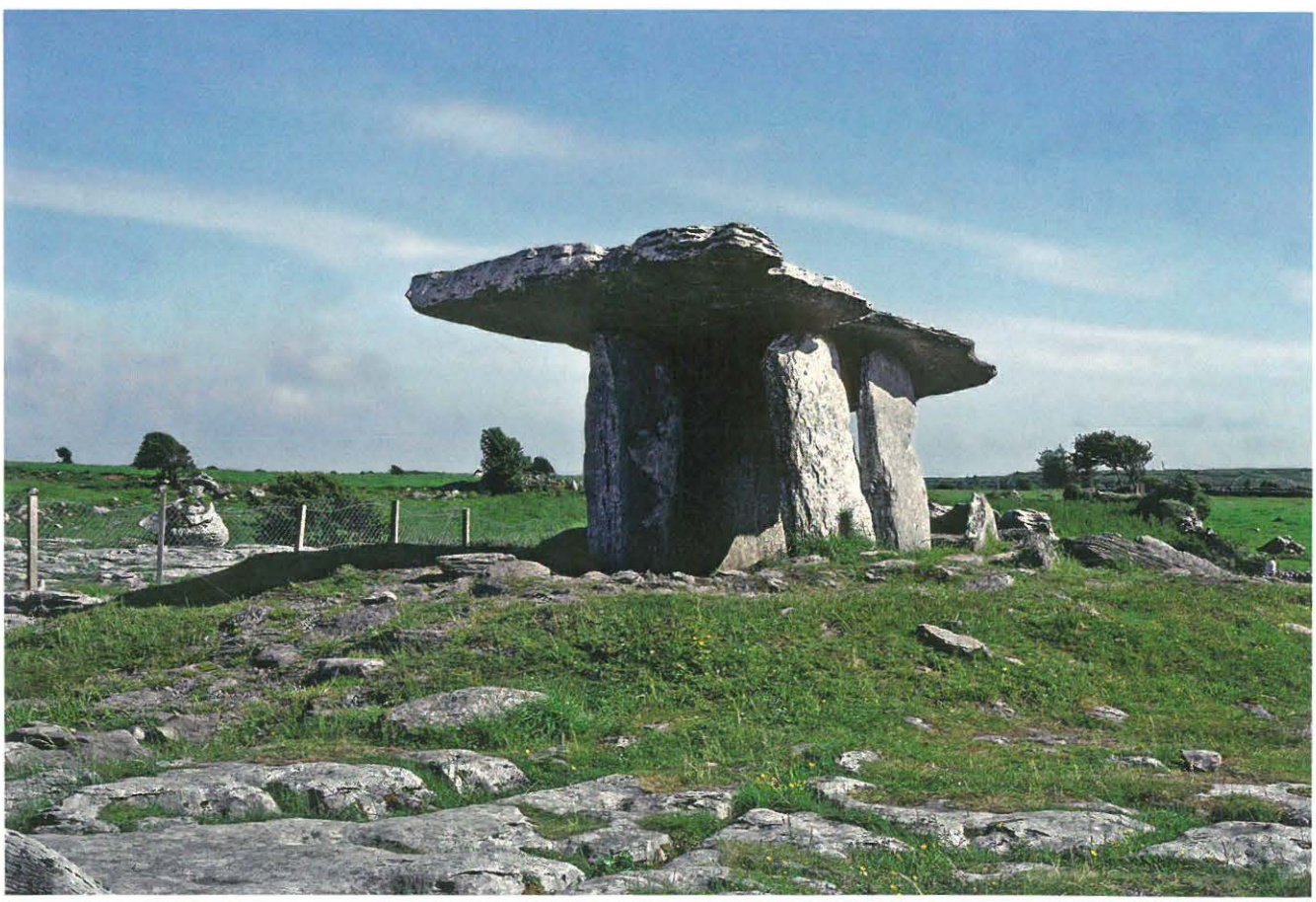

Fig. 18.4. *Irish portal tomb of Poulnabrone on the Burren, Ireland. Excavations in the 1980s revealed traces of a small oval kerb-less cairn, but it is unlikely that this would ever have covered the capstone.*

number of them are provided with a short entrance passage, but this does not reach as far as the encircling boulders and does not coincide with a break in the boulder circle (fig. 18.5). Excavations at several of the Carrowmore tombs in the 1970s revealed no traces of mounds or cairns within the boulder circles, and in the case of grave 27 the excavator concluded there can never have been a covering mound.[46] The chamber uprights had been supported by a packing of stones around their base but there was no evidence that this material had slipped or spread either within or beyond the limits of the boulder ring. The packing stones can have supported at most only a low platform. Earlier references to "cairns" at Carrowmore are either inaccurate, or relate to recent stone clearance from the fields surrounding the sites.[47]

Most Irish passage tombs do, however, appear to have had covering mounds or cairns, and the Carrowmore monuments are unusual in this respect. Yet as in western Britain, it is important to recall the chamber must inevitably have been constructed before the mound or cairn that covered it, and that for a period of time, all megalithic chambers must have been free-standing. In some cases, the mound or cairn may have been added immediately, without a break in the constructional sequence. In other instances, by contrast, the addition of the covering mound may have been an afterthought, and might have followed only after a period of several decades or centuries. This is the kind of sequence revealed at a number of Danish monuments. The evidence is not always easy to read. At Tårup in East Jutland, excavation was unable to provide definitive evidence that the megalithic chamber had initially been free-standing.[48] It can nonetheless be suggested that the original structure was only later covered by a turf mound before being enclosed in the Early Bronze Age in a much larger mound. A similar sequence may apply to Carrowmore tomb 51, which stands apart from the rest of the Carrowmore tombs, both in its position at the centre of the cemetery, and its morphology. It was the only Carrowmore tomb with remains of a cairn, but a significant interval may have elapsed between the completion of the tomb and the addition of the cairn.[49]

An even clearer demonstration of this phenomenon is provided by the tomb of Mound of the Hostages at Tara.[50] Here the passage grave is covered by a two-tier structure: an inner cairn of stones, and an outer mound of earth (fig. 18.6). The chamber remained accessible and continued to receive new inhumations into the Early Bronze Age, at which time individual burials were also inserted into the earthen mound. It is possible, indeed, that the earthen mound was added only at this period, which would provide direct analogy with the sequence documented at Danish sites such as Tårup (see p. 71). The "great mound" at Newgrange may have been added in the late 3rd or early 2nd millennium BC, enclosing and concealing the famous passage tomb and its decorated kerb.[51] It is the beginning of the sequence at Mound of the Hostages that is particularly interesting, however, since behind the orthostats, three small stone-slab cists were constructed. These contained cremated human remains that must have been deposited after the erection of the chamber but before the construction of the inner cairn. Radiocarbon dates and the presence of Carrowkeel bowls suggest that the deposits in the cists were contemporary with the initial

burials within the chamber. This implies that the chamber at Mound of the Hostages was receiving human burials, as a free-standing structure, for an indeterminate but possibly extended period before the cairn was added. The potential parallels and contrasts with the sequence at Bryn Celli Ddu are particularly striking.

The decoupling of chamber and cairn suggested by the evidence of these British and Irish examples is more than a mere constructional detail: it goes to the very heart of what we consider a megalithic tomb to be. We shall return to that issue below, but first let us briefly review the evidence for cairns and mounds at Neolithic chambered tombs in northern France.

Cairns and mounds in northern France

Several of the early French antiquaries, as we saw above, drew a distinction between burial mounds on the one hand, and dolmens or megalithic chambers on the other, and considered the latter to have been free-standing structures. From the 1850s, however, it came generally to be recognised that the current condition of many mega-

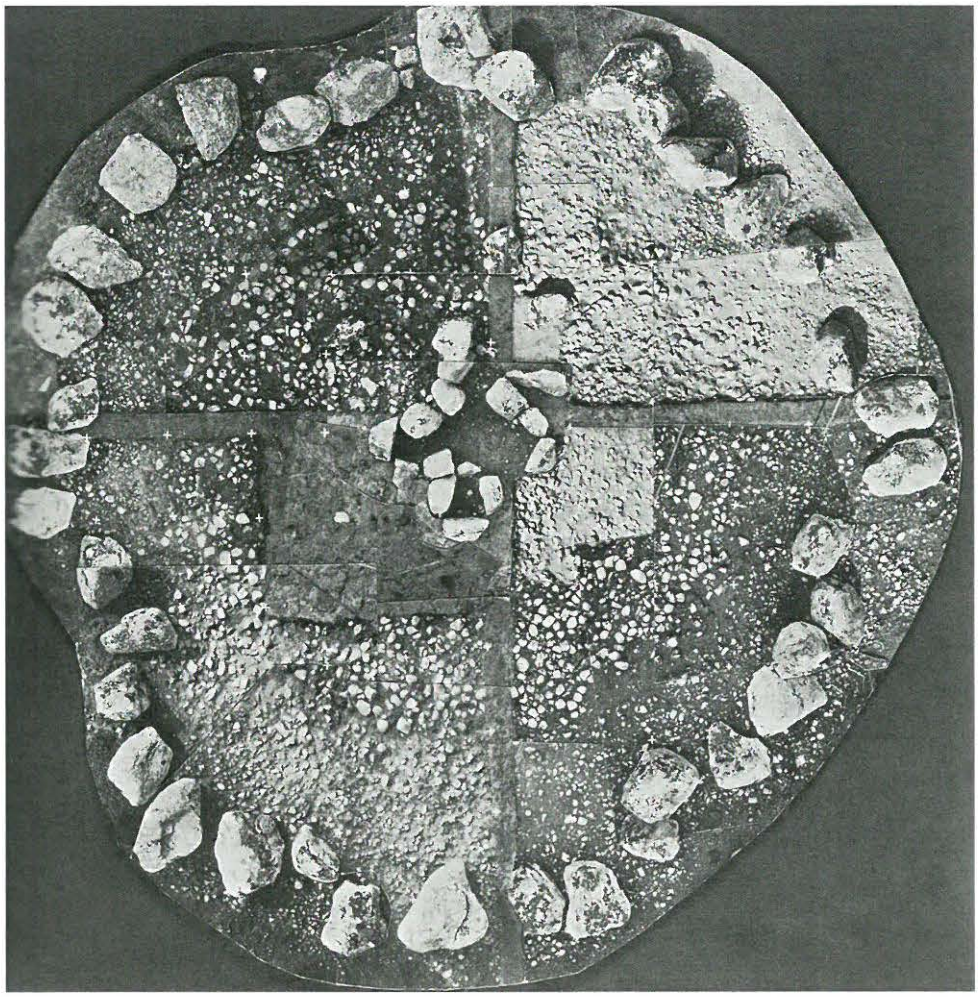

Fig. 18.5. *Photo mosaic of excavations at Carrowmore tomb 27, Ireland.*

lithic tombs was the result of centuries of erosion and human interference. By the 20th century the concept of the free-standing megalithic chamber had been largely abandoned. Prehistorian Jean Arnal, for example, defined the "dolmen" as an "accessible burial chamber, generally megalithic, covered by a mound and intended to receive several inhumations."[52] He accepted that some may take issue with the presence of a mound in all cases, but he considered it impossible to envisage a weatherproof protective chamber for the dead without one.

In northwest France, many famous megalithic tombs have ample evidence for the existence or former existence of a covering mound. These are not mere dumps of earth and stone. It is now more than a century since Zacharie Le Rouzic noted the presence of concentric internal walls within the cairn covering the passage grave of Ile Longue,[53] and the internal structure of the Breton passage grave cairns achieved greater prominence following Pierre-Roland Giot's excavations at Barnenez in the 1950s. When Giot began work at Barnenez he was struck by the fact that the inner walls were visible high up the mound, standing to a greater height than the outer kerb of the monument. As he himself explains, "Such structural features had hitherto been considered part of the internal arrangements hidden within the cairns, evidence of phases and techniques of construction, and playing the role of retaining or supporting walls." It was this that led him to propose a stepped mound, and thus was the monument of Barnenez physically reconstructed at the end of his excavations. The published detail does not allow us to go further than this.[54] Reconstruction at several northern French passage graves has subsequently adopted the stepped concept to a greater or lesser degree, giving these monuments a very different appearance to that envisaged for most British and Irish sites.

Internally structured cairns are a recurrent feature of passage tombs in northern France but other types of monument tell a different or more ambiguous story. The Late Neolithic *allées couvertes* of the Seine-Somme region, for example, were megalithic chambers sunk into a trench, with little trace of a covering mound. At Méréaucourt, indeed, evidence indicates that the capstones were added only when the tomb was put out of use by being filled with sediment to the top of the orthostats. During the use-life of the tomb, the only covering may have been a lightweight structure of timber or thatch.[55] At the neighbouring site of La Chaussée-Tirancourt, the infilling of the chamber was followed not by the placement of capstones but (after an interval) by the systematic destruction by fire of the protruding upper parts of the orthostats. The orthostats fractured into thousands of fragments which were left littering the surface of the site.[56] The monument was essentially buried and forgotten.

The absence of mounds or cairns at Paris basin *allées couvertes* draws attention to the possibility that the *allées couvertes* of northwestern France may also have been free-standing. Excavations or other indications have however shown them to be systematically enclosed within the footings of a cairn.[57] In most cases, however, it remains difficult to determine whether this was a true covering cairn or merely a platform around the base of the structure. One exception to that uncertainty is provided by the *allée couverte* of Coat-Menez-Guen in southern Finistère, where the remains of the

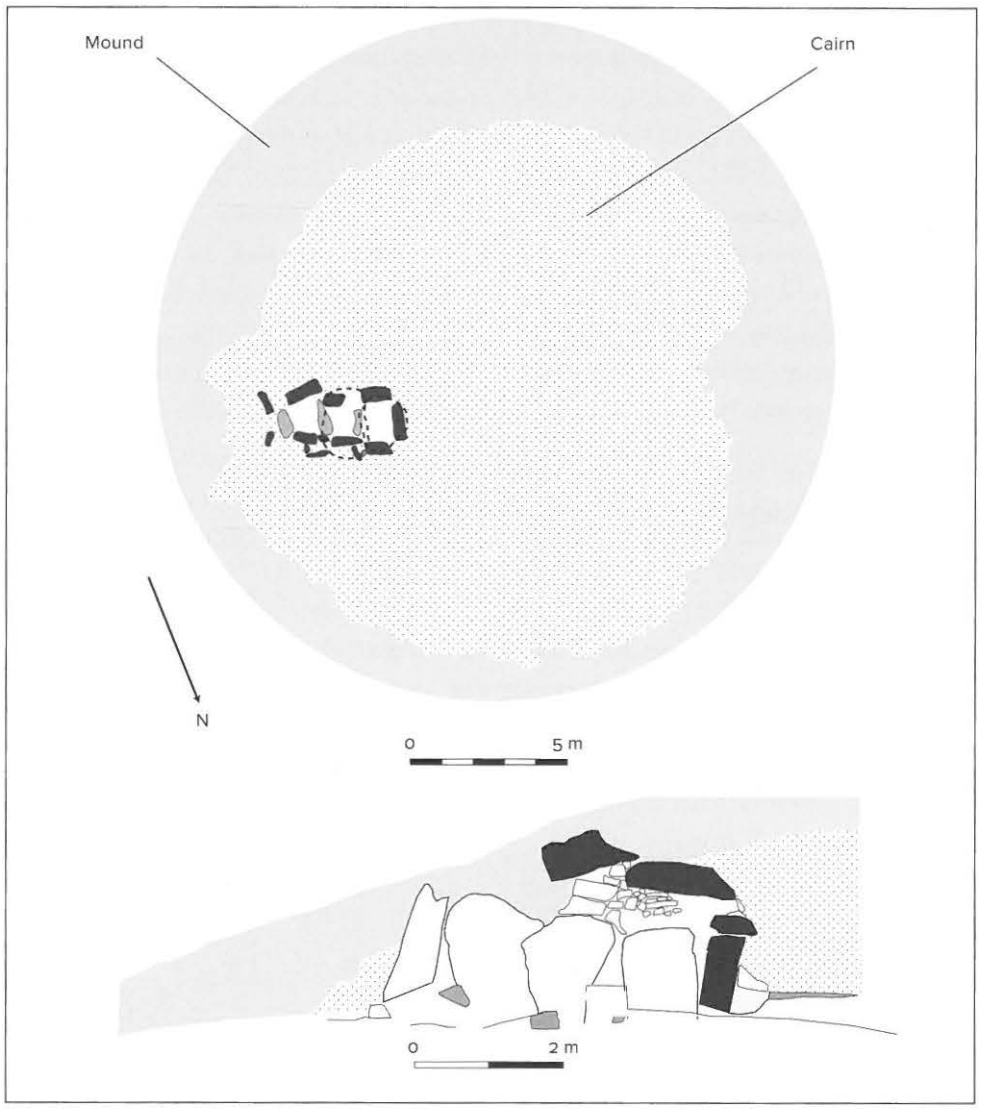

Fig. 18.6. *The passage grave Mound of the Hostages at Tara, Ireland. Plan and section through the chamber.*

mound reach the level of the underside of the capstones,[58] but the curious morphology of this tomb raises other questions about its original appearance.

Recent investigations in the Channel Islands have shown that some of the megalithic tombs in the Guernsey archipelago lacked a covering mound. On the small island of Herm, the Robert's Cross tomb appears to be sunk within a mound, but excavation revealed this to be an accumulation of wind-blown sand of medieval origin. There was no trace of a mound or cairn, beyond a packing of granite blocks against the foot of the orthostats.

Probably the most impressive of all the megalithic tombs of northern France are the "dolmens angevins" of the Loire region. Here again, evidence for an enclosing structure has been found at some sites and conventional wisdom holds that these structures are the bases of cairns that originally covered the whole monument. At La Bajoulière near Saumur, a well-built kerb defined an oval inner cairn within a

broader spread of material. The cairn material had been heavily robbed in Roman times, but in one place the pattern of the collapsed stones appeared to indicate that the kerb had stood to a height of at least 1.6 m.[59] It is hence not impossible that the cairn, despite the scanty surviving traces, did originally cover and enclose this large and impressive chamber, concealing it from view. That is somewhat surprising given the scale and appearance of the tomb, which one might assume was designed to impress the viewer (fig. 18.7). We must remember, however, that the chamber at La Bajoulière would have been built first, before the cairn was added. For a period of time it would have been exposed and visible, and there is nothing to preclude the possibility that (as at Mound of the Hostages) the chamber was receiving burials long before the cairn was built.

Cairns as closure

For most of the monuments discussed above, the presence of a cairn or mound did not in itself obstruct access to the funerary space. In other cases, however, the addition of the cairn was a definitive act of closure, preventing any further funerary deposition within the cist or chamber. The provision of a cairn or mound may not always have been part of the original design; and it may have marked the memorialisation of a previous burial space, not one that was still actively receiving new deposits.

A good, if spectacular, example is provided by the Tumulus de Saint-Michel at Carnac in southern Brittany. Its present form and dimensions are the product of successive actions or activities, the most obvious being the individual constructional phases: the cists and chambers on the original ground surface, the rubble core, the lake marl capping, the rubble outer layer and passage grave.[60] A gallery excavated between the centre of the mound and its eastern terminal at the beginning of the 20th century discovered four buried structures on the old ground surface: a circle of stone blocks and three cists. At the very centre, again resting on the original ground surface, were two megalithic chambers surrounded by a cluster of a further 21 small stone cists.[61] All of these structures were built and used before work on the cairn began. Once the cairn was in place, they were closed and inaccessible.

We find a similar sequence at the Tumulus du Moustoir, another of the massive "Carnac" mounds.[62] The earliest activity is represented by a stone-ringed hearth and a megalithic chamber. After a time, that chamber was sealed away within a conical mound, prohibiting access, and a second chamber was built alongside it in which funerary activity continued for a further period. That in turn was then sealed within the rubble core of a long mound, and another free-standing chamber (a large rectangular cist) was built just beyond its western end. Eventually, a capping of lake marl was laid over all of these structures, and an outer covering of rubble was added to enlarge the mound to its present height and length (fig. 18.8).

Thus the conventional image of the "chambered cairn" may be in many cases illusory. Chambers were not only built first, but may have functioned as free-standing structures, not waiting for the "completion" of a covering mound before burials

were placed within them. In some instances, indeed, the mound or cairn may have marked the closure of the monument, and its transformation into a memorial. This was clearly the sequence at the non-chambered long mounds of southern and eastern Britain. These cover the remains of mortuary houses or other timber structures associated with burials. In most cases all that survives are post-holes, but waterlogging at Haddenham in the Cambridgeshire Fenland preserved a series of massive slabs of wood that invited comparison with the slabs of stone used in contemporary megalithic constructions.[63] At many of these long mound sites the timber structures had been intentionally destroyed by burning. The long mounds that mark their locations were hence not containers for the timber mortuary structures but memorials covering the places where they once stood. The long mounds themselves are not associated with new funerary deposition, but are essentially acts of closure.

Two key conclusions arise from this brief overview of megalithic sites in Britain, Ireland and northern France (fig. 18.9). The first is the importance of *sequence*: that in monuments where a chamber is covered by a mound, the chamber may have operated for a significant period before the mound or cairn was added. It is generally difficult to determine the length of that period, but free-standing chambers may have been much more common than conventional wisdom suggests. There will have been exceptions, notably in the case of corbel-vaulted burial chambers where paral-

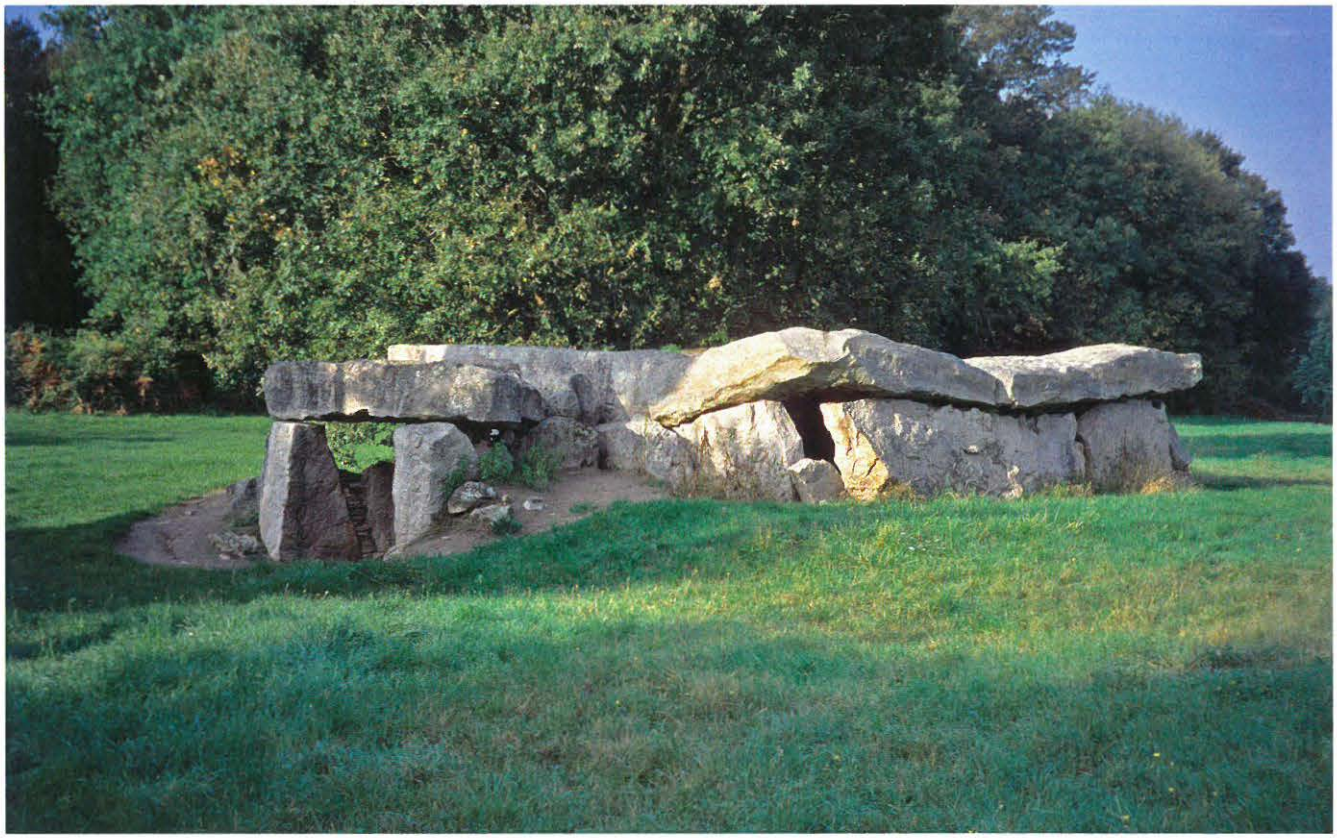

Fig. 18.7. *La Bajoulière, a dolmen angevin at Saint-Rémy-la-Varenne, Maine-et-Loire, France.*

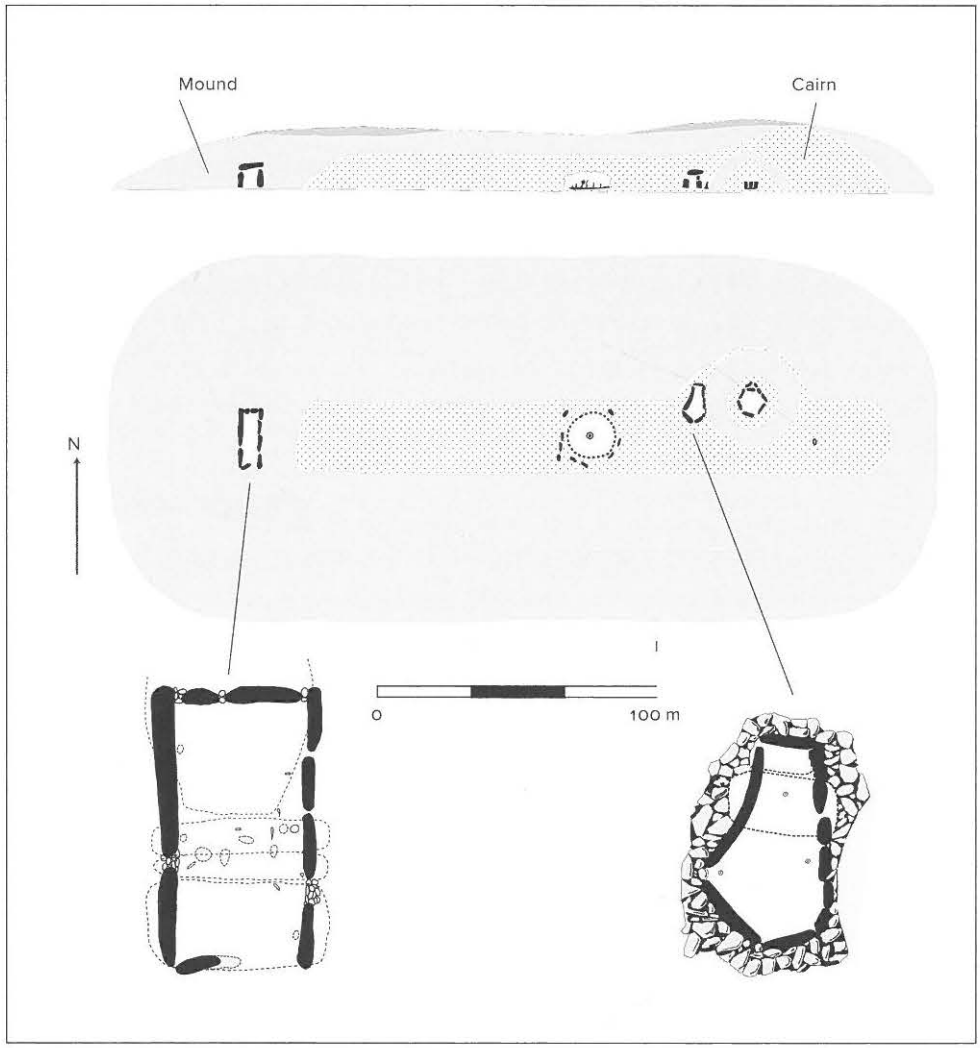

Fig. 18.8. *Constructional phases in the long mound of Le Moustoir, Carnac, Morbihan, France.*

lel construction of the chamber and cairn would have been essential to ensure the stability of the covering. In other cases, however, the building of a mound or cairn may have been the final stage in a multi-phase sequence of construction, use and abandonment.

In second place we have to recognise how difficult it is to reconstruct the original three-dimensionality of these monuments. Nineteenth century antiquarians were sometimes misled by the appearance of the surviving megalithic structures and overlooked issues of natural degradation and human interference. Absence of a visible mound does not necessarily indicate that one never existed. Furthermore, at many well-known sites the covering mound still survives, such as West Kennet in Wiltshire, Gavrinis in Brittany and Newgrange in Ireland. In the majority of cases, however, excavation may discover the base of a cairn-like structure but that discovery does not resolve the question of its original character. Was it merely a bench or platform, or did it rise above the capstones? Careful observation can sometimes

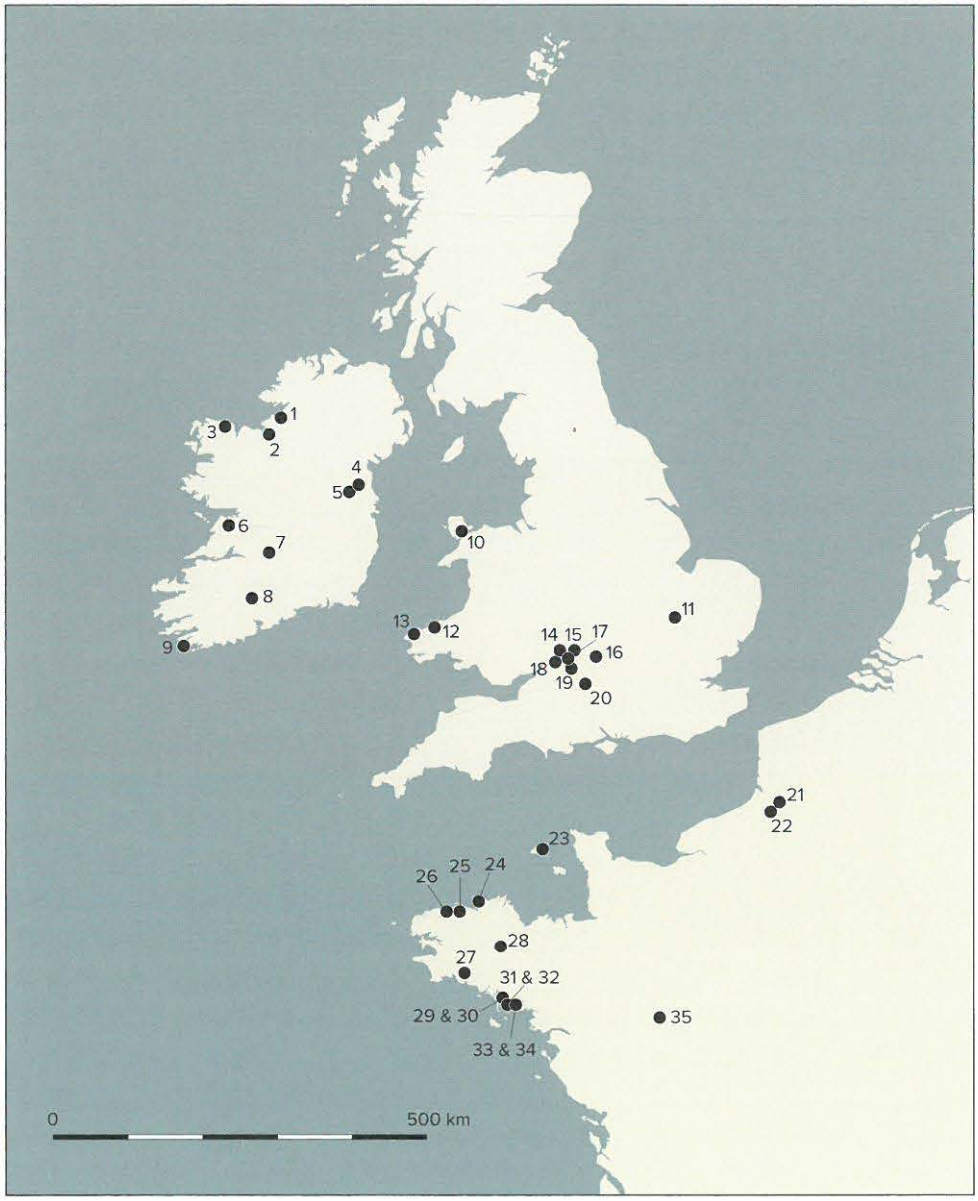

Fig. 18.9. *Map of the localities in France, England, Wales and Ireland mentioned in the text.*

1. *Creevykeel*
2. *Carrowmore*
3. *Ballyglass*
4. *Newgrange*
5. *Mound of Hostages, Tara*
6. *Poulnabrone*
7. *Baurnadomeeny*
8. *Island*
9. *Leenane*
10. *Bryn Celli Ddu*
11. *Haddenham*
12. *Pentre Ifan*
13. *Carreg Samson*
14. *Belas Knap*
16. *Cow Common Long*
15. *Hazleton North*
17. *Ascott-under-Wychwood*
18. *West Tump*
19. *Lamborough Banks*
20. *West Kennet*
21. *La Chaussée-Tirancourt*
22. *Méréaucourt*
23. *Robert's Cross*
24. *Prajou-Menhir*
25. *Barnenez*
26. *Kernic*
27. *Coat-Menez-Guen*
28. *Liscuis*
29. *Tumulus de Saint-Michel*
30. *Tumulus du Moustoir*
31. *Er Grah*
32. *Table des Marchands*
33. *Gavrinis*
34. *Ile Longue*
35. *La Bajoulière*

determine the issue, but not in all cases. What emerges is the diversity of forms that is encountered among the Neolithic monuments of northwest Europe, and the realisation that structures that look very similar in their current denuded state, or from the published plan, could have been strikingly different in concept and appearance.